

Ethel Payne: “First Lady of the Black Press”

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Throughout history, data has been recorded by various methods. The newspaper, an excellent way to record events, has been so successful in preserving our past that today we still see newspapers in almost every corner of the world. Newspapers give writers a chance to not only report what is happening around the world, but also to express one's opinions. Ethel Payne, a bold journalist who fought for civil rights, used the newspaper as an opportunity to share her views on the topic of segregation.

On August 14, 1911, Ethel Lois Payne was born in Chicago, Illinois. From day one she knew her life would be tough, being the descendent of slaves. Her parents, William and Bessie Austin, worked hard to support six children. When Ethel was twelve, her father, who worked as a Pullman porter, passed away. As a result, Ethel's mother was forced to teach high school Latin and clean houses.

In 1920, Ethel, after graduating from Lindblom High School, attempted to fulfill her dream of becoming a lawyer. She applied to law school, but was rejected because of her race. Unwilling to accept defeat, Payne attended two different colleges in Chicago and after graduating, worked for the Chicago Public Library as a clerk. She also became involved with the Illinois Human Rights Commission, fighting for equality in her neighborhood. Desiring a more challenging life, she took the opportunity to work as a hostess for the Army Special Services Club and was quickly sent to Tokyo, Japan, where she organized leisure activities for African-American troops. While there, Payne kept a diary, writing about her personal experiences with segregation among the troops. In 1950,

she was greeted by *Chicago Defender* journalist Alex Wilson and showed him the diary. Impressed by her works, Wilson showed Payne's diary to his editor. Much to Payne's surprise, many of the entries in her diary made the front page of the *Chicago Defender*, and she was offered a job with the newspaper. Since the army was not happy with Payne for reporting misconduct among the officers, she quickly took the offer.

Returning to the United States in 1951, Payne, along with writing full-time for the *Defender*, attended night classes at the school of journalism at Northwestern University in Chicago, where she received her degree in 1955. Louis Martin, her editor, hired her to write features, but with Payne's work ethic, he soon had her writing hard-hitting, front-page stories. In 1952, after writing an article dealing with the adoption crises of African-American babies, the Illinois Press Association presented her an award for best news story. As a result, her editor allowed her to investigate any story she desired. Losing interest in the news of Chicago and having been offered a more favorable job with another newspaper, she turned down that offer when she received the opportunity to act as the *Defender's* one-person news-bureau in Washington D.C.

Once at the capital, Payne immediately applied to be a part of the White House press corps, giving her a White House position at press conferences. She was only the second African-American woman to receive this honor. Although it was an unwritten rule that African-Americans never asked questions at these conferences, Payne took a gamble and asked President Eisenhower about the Lincoln Day celebration incident, where the choir from Howard University, because of their race, was not allowed into the building where they were to perform. President Eisenhower, who had not heard of this, responded with an apology. Newspapers around the country were writing articles about Payne, an

African-American woman who had the courage to ask the President of the United States a question. From that point on, Payne became recognized at every press conference. The battle between the press and segregation had been won. Payne also confronted the president on the issue of segregated interstate travel, which proved to be a touchy subject for Eisenhower. When asked by Payne how long it would be before desegregation occurred on interstates, the president's temper flared and he raised his voice at her, stunning the audience. After this, Payne was never recognized again at White House press corps conferences.

Covering breaking news in and out of the country, Payne was reporting for the *Chicago Defender* at almost all major civil rights events in the South. She was sent to Montgomery, Alabama in 1956 to record the news of Rosa Park's refusal to give up her seat to a white man. Also, while still in Montgomery, she witnessed and wrote about the bus boycott led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and even joined those marching. During the effort to integrate the University of Alabama and at the enrollment of nine African-American students in Little Rock, Arkansas, Payne was there. Not only did she follow breaking news in the United States, but also outside the country. Payne, covering stories all over the world, was named the first African-American woman to focus on international news. During times of war, Payne reported news at the locations of the wars, following United States soldiers almost everywhere. Altogether, Payne recorded news incidents from over thirty countries on six different continents.

After the *Defender* transferred Payne back to Chicago as an associate editor for the paper, she decided it was time for her to move on, so in 1978, she resigned, ending her twenty-seven-year career with the paper. Lecturing, writing columns for several

different African-American newspapers, and teaching at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee occupied most of her free time.

On May 28, 1991, at the age of seventy-nine, Ethel Lois Payne died from a heart attack at her home in Washington, D.C. Her works will be commemorated as well as her persistent and devoted nature towards life. Being the strong woman she was, Payne, through her writings, gave the African-Americans a voice. Ethel Payne will go down in history as the “First Lady of the Black Press”. [From Donald A. Ritchie, *American Journalists*; Rodger Streitmatter, *Raising Her Voice*; Wallace Terry, *Missing Pages*; and Roland Wolseley, *Black Achievers in American Journalism*.]